



Quarterly Report
BANGLADESH: STRENGTHENING COOPERATION
BETWEEN POLITICAL PARTIES IN PARLIAMENT
USAID Grant #338-A-00-00-00055-00
July 1 to September 30, 2001

I. SUMMARY

Following popular protests against the military government, Bangladeshis re-established democratic elections in their country in 1991. Since then, despite two broadly accepted elections, democratic advances have been impeded by a lack of institutional mechanisms to encourage citizen input in the legislative process, a low level of confidence in election processes, and frequent and problematic *hartals* (general strikes) and incidents of street and political violence.

Since June 1999, NDI has worked with political parties and civic society organizations (CSOs) to increase citizen involvement in the legislative process and to increase cooperation between political parties. This quarter, NDI played an active role in addressing the objectives set out in this grant by: 1) taking steps to increase citizen involvement in the parliamentary process through the implementation of the *Study Circles* citizen forum program; 2) increasing the legitimacy of the electoral process through election and pre-election observation missions, conducting a political party polling agent training of trainers program, and creating and distributing a party polling agents' manuals; and 3) strengthening Parliament through ongoing engagement with party leadership and civil society regarding political party reform. In addition to completing election related activities and drafting reports on the program, NDI will continue establishing lines of communication and cooperation between civil society and Parliamentary committees as well as within and between the political parties.

II. BACKGROUND

NDI's Past Work with Parliament and Elections

In 1991, Bangladesh held multiparty elections that were broadly accepted by all political parties. Since these elections, Bangladeshis have struggled to develop an effective, accountable and independent legislature, due to a legacy of mistrust between the major political parties. Rather than working within Parliament to resolve differences, political parties have boycotted parliamentary proceedings and held street demonstrations that limit the effectiveness of the country's government.

The strengthening of Parliament requires concrete legislative reforms and an increase in citizens' involvement in the parliamentary process. Many Bangladeshi political party members, government officials, civil society representatives and media members are committed to improving the quality of governance in their country and have asked NDI for its continued assistance.

Over the course of the past nine years, NDI has conducted a range of programs to strengthen democratic institutions in Bangladesh. Previous NDI programs focused on strengthening the electoral process and increasing popular political participation. Starting in 1990, NDI observed numerous polls and made recommendations on improving the electoral process. NDI organized a comprehensive international observer program for the June 1996 general elections to increase openness and trust in the electoral process. NDI also worked with civic leaders to increase citizens' involvement in monitoring elections. In support of such efforts, NDI helped create and train Bangladesh's first and largest citizens' election monitoring network, the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA). During subsequent elections, FEMA mobilized hundreds of thousands of citizens to monitor the electoral process. The group continues to advocate for electoral reform, organizes workshops and seminars aimed at strengthening democracy in Bangladesh, and intends to field 70,000 observers in the elections expected on October 1, 2001.

In 1993, at the request of members of parliament, NDI held seminars and consultations with members of the parliamentary parties to discuss ways to strengthen the legislature and its committee structure. At the request of senior government officials and party representatives, NDI organized a multiparty roundtable for parliamentary leaders in April 1997 to discuss the role, composition and powers of committees in the Bangladesh parliament. Following these initiatives the government adopted several of the roundtable's recommendations, including a law that forbids ministers from chairing parliamentary committees.

The Institute has conducted activities designed to increase citizens' input in the legislative process. In September 1999, NDI held a forum for civic leaders to discuss effective advocacy strategies. Following the workshop, participants organized a meeting on how they could bring the current political deadlock between the parties to an end. In November 1999, NDI held a seminar on the role civil society can play in the work of parliamentary committees. The workshop brought together committee chairmen and representatives from local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to share ideas about how civil society could assist parliamentary committees with the development/drafting of laws that better address the needs of Bangladeshi citizens.

The Institute organized four workshops on the functioning of the major parliamentary parties. During the forums, NDI representatives discussed with party members ways to improve parliamentary procedures. The Bangladeshi participants came up with a number of recommendations to improve parliamentary processes: improving debate within party caucuses; strengthening the role of the Speaker; and increasing the opposition's role during plenary proceedings and legislators' ability to act independently of their parties. The Institute will build and expand upon these past efforts in its future work.

In addition, with funds from the Australian Agency for International Development, NDI led a delegation of parliamentary leaders from the major political parties and representatives of civil society to study the Australian parliamentary process. The trip provided participants with a unique opportunity to discuss, in a neutral setting, ways to improve cooperation between the political parties and strengthen the legislature.

Political update

On October 1, Bangladesh will hold its eighth Parliamentary elections in an atmosphere marked by considerable tension and amidst fears of widespread violence. Following the first successful completion of a full parliamentary term in office the Awami League, winners of the June 1996 elections, passed control of the government to a nonpartisan caretaker administration in mid-July. That government, headed by Chief Adviser and former Chief Justice Latifur Rahman and supported by a cabinet of ten advisors appointed by him, immediately took steps to counter two of the problems identified by opposition activists as being obstacles to the conduct of a free and fair election: the politicization of the election apparatus and the presence of illegal arms. Through the swift transfer of Deputy Commissioners, Police Inspector Generals, and other officials the first goal was achieved, although against the strong protests of the Awami League. The second goal was not, and the continued presence of large numbers of illegal weapons (widely reported as being in excess of 200,000) has continued to contribute to fears of election-day violence.

Despite the decision to allow the Armed Forces to play a more active role during the election period, including granting them permission to provide security inside polling stations, there was widespread violence during the campaign period with several politically motivated killings per day. The violence level remained constant throughout the campaign, and then increased dramatically during the final week before election day.

The campaign has focused on personalized and negative attacks by the main parties, with little or no discussion of issues. The release of the party manifestoes midway through the campaign had minimal impact, although it is worth noting that the platforms, especially that of the Awami League, included specific references to a number of positive reform measures, including some of those suggested by NDI and by former President Jimmy Carter.

The success of the NDI/ Carter Center led pre-election delegation, which met with a variety of political and civic leaders during the first days of August 2001 and brought the leaders of the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) together at a historic meeting, was mixed. The recommendations made by the delegation and agreed to by the main political parties were breached during the weeks following President Carter's departure.

Despite the tenuous success of the delegation to alter the political landscape, there was an overwhelmingly positive political and public reaction to the delegation, and a feeling that the former President's contribution had placed the parties on notice that the international community was watching the election in Bangladesh closely.

It is likely that the political situation in Bangladesh will not be completely clear until days or weeks after election day, if the usual pattern of post-defeat protests from the losing party or parties is repeated. At present, it cannot be said with confidence that the conditions exist for fully free and fair elections, although the restraint shown by the major parties in avoiding a full-scale deployment of their armed cadres gives cause for some optimism.

The Institute will monitor election day and its aftermath closely, and provide a detailed report as soon as possible. This report will rely on the analysis of other reports more than independent observations, due to the cancellation of the NDI/The Carter Center delegation following the September 11 attacks on the US.

III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

The overall goal of this program is to strengthen the parliament's role in the political process and increase the political effectiveness of civil society and its engagement in the legislative process. Although NDI has continued its work developing and implementing the study circles program to facilitate increased citizens' participation in Parliament and facilitate discussion on reform, a majority of the work conducted during this reporting period has involved preparations for the October 1 elections. Those preparations have included a national political party polling agent program, a pre-election mission headed by former US President Jimmy Carter, and a series of meetings held across the country chaired by the President of the Victoria State Legislative Council in Australia, Mr. Bruce Chamberlain, MLC.

The Institute has focused attention on election preparations in order to meet the needs of the political climate, and address the pressing concerns of the citizenry and political parties. The objectives of this grant are as follows:

- Increasing Citizen Involvement in the Parliamentary Process
- Increasing the Legitimacy of the Electoral Process
- Assisting Members of Parliament in Reviewing and Strengthening Parliamentary Procedures

Increasing Citizen Involvement in the Parliamentary Process

NDI has continued to develop and begun to implement its planned study circles program. Working in conjunction with Fareeda Aktar of Inner Force, a local NGO hired on a short-term contract to implement the first NDI-Bangladesh study circle, NDI met with a variety of governance, academic and civil society groups from August 24 to 28 to brief them on the program and gain their input and advice into the design of activities.

The Institute hopes to develop study circles as a means to engage the major political parties, other political players, and the public in a non-violent and structured format through which policy issues can be discussed and refined. NDI is optimistic that this model can be applied more broadly, and that it can be used as an alternative to the politics of *hartals*, or general strikes, that currently offers the general public their only outlet for political expression.

The planned visit by Swedish study-circles expert Bosse Bergnehr was postponed due to a conflict with the October 1 election, and will be rescheduled for a date later this year.

Increasing the Legitimacy of the Electoral Process

Training Polling Agents

The polling agent program that begun in April 2001 was completed during the week before election day. Overwhelmingly successful, the program sought to include national and local leaders in the training process, and to directly offer training to activists at the constituency level through a series of seminars held at different locations across the country. The seminars were held during the first three weeks of September and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the Jamaat-e-Islami, and the Jatiya Party participated fully in the program while the Awami League accepted the polling agent manual produced by NDI but declined to participate in the training program itself. Awami members preferred to use their own in-house training institute. Several smaller parties also participated in the training program in a more limited fashion, and were also provided with access to the polling agent manuals and other materials.

Identifying and Training Divisional Leaders

Using contacts established at the national level during the early summer, efforts were made to identify political leaders in each of the divisional towns, including Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal, Sylhet, Chittagong and Rangpur City. A team consisting of Dominic Cardy, Trina Lasch, Reza Amin, Shown Lubna and Noor Ayesha made trips to each of those towns in June and July, meeting with political leaders and other officials. Each of the contacted leaders was asked to work with NDI and to provide the name of a person who could be trained by the Institute.

Once identified, 21 divisional trainers from each of the participating parties: the Jamaat-e-Islami, Jatiya Party (Ershad's faction) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party attended a three-day training program held in Dhaka. The training covered the electoral rules, the political process, how to observe elections and how to report on them. Run by the NDI trainers hired in June, these workshops were held for emerging leaders selected by their party leadership to be Divisional Trainers for their party's election agent training workshops.

Of 21 people invited to the training, 19 attended, with one absent from the BNP and one from the Jatiya Party. Both of these individuals were given one-day trainings later. At the conclusion of the training, the participants asked for and received a joint graduation ceremony. There was one training held for each political party in the divisional towns (the trainings were run simultaneously). There was one exception, in Sylhet, the final training location, where the political parties of Sylhet agreed to hold a training and lunch session with all of the political parties present. The political parties in Sylhet have a history of working collaboratively on local issues. This combined NDI session was very successful and received positive feedback from all of the participating parties.

Holding Polling Agent Workshops for Election Agents

In September the NDI trainers traveled across the country, holding 19 workshops in the six divisions (Dhaka, Sylhet, Barisal, Khulna, Chittagong, and Rajshahi) with their counterparts from the political parties to train election agents or other appointed activists. The divisional leaders trained the polling agents in the same topics covered during their training program with NDI. The workshops were highly successful. Attendance averaged over 70%, with several at 100%. In total, more than 700 activists were trained. Participation and support from divisional political leaders and from the political party trainers ranged from lukewarm to enthusiastic, but it was clear the connection of the program to the hierarchies of the parties in many cases ensured the program's success (See Appendix A: Training Chart).

The final workshop, held in Sylhet on September 22, concluded with a joint session that brought together participants from all four major parties in Bangladesh, in addition to the Deputy Commissioner and head of the Security Police. All party activists joined for a shared lunch, which received widespread local media coverage. Before the September 11 attacks, NDI had intended to make the lunch as high profile as possible, but following the attacks, the Institute felt that it was best to keep a low profile, as foreigners were involved. Those who attended the lunch heralded it as being unprecedented in their political careers. Special credit is due to Mucqtabus Al Noor, President of the Sylhet Press Club, who helped coordinate the lunch.

Evaluating and Reporting

A final evaluation of this activity will be completed after the October 1 elections. The evaluation will include an analysis of the questionnaires filled out by workshop participants and reports filed by NDI trainers and other staff.

Producing a Polling Agent Manual

The polling agent manual was printed with funds from this grant and two other grants, one from USAID and another from the American Center. Each party was able to place their own party symbol on their versions of the manuals. NDI printed more than 600,000 manuals in Bengali for the political parties. The manuals contain information about the Bangladeshi political process, the importance of the opposition in parliament and polling agents' job responsibilities related to preparing for election day, monitoring the elections, counting the votes and transporting the ballots. Accompanied by a checklist that polling agents were to complete and return to their parties the manual was enthusiastically received by all major and several minor political parties (See Appendix B: Polling Agent Manual).

International observers from the United States Embassy and the European Union used the English version of the manual and excerpts were included in the training materials provided by the United Nations Electoral Assistance Program. Various diplomatic missions and international NGOs also requested copies. In addition, several local NGOs requested copies of the Bengali version, which they used as part of their training for domestic observer programs.

A NDI/ Carter Center Pre-Election Assessment Delegation

Former US President Jimmy Carter, accompanied by senior NDI and Carter Center staff and Ms. Saumora Tioulang, Member of Parliament and deputy leader of the opposition Sam Rainsy party of Cambodia, visited Bangladesh during the first days of August as part of NDI's pre-election activities.

Before the former President's arrival, the rest of the delegation met with groups of academics, journalists, NGO leaders, diplomats and women's organizations. Information from these meetings contributed to the briefing provided to President Carter, who met with the leaders of the major political parties in addition to the Chief Election Commissioner, the Chief Adviser and the President. Following these meetings, which included the first meeting in almost a year between the leader of the BNP and the leader of the Awami League, President Carter and the delegation was able to obtain commitments from the major parties on a specific list of reforms and actions that related both to the election and post-election period.

NDI and The Carter Center produced a joint Pre-Election Assessment Statement that was distributed to the political parties and local media. Within the statement, the two organizations summarized their observations of the political context and listed recommendations that would lead to a more peaceful and fair election. The Institute and Carter Center also held a press conference with representatives from a variety of organizations to publicize the findings of, and recommendations in, the report (See Appendix A: Pre-Election Assessment Statement).

Preparing for a Carter Center/ NDI Election Mission

Because of the global security situation arising from the September 11 attacks on the United States, the NDI/TCC election delegation was cancelled. However, the preparation work for the delegation had been completed at the time of its cancellation, including advance work done at sites across the country, the relocation of two Washington based staff to Dhaka to assist with coordinating the delegation, and a number of other expenditures made throughout the preceding six months related to hotel bookings, airline tickets, vehicle rentals, briefing book production and communications.

Assisting Members of Parliament in Reviewing and Strengthening Parliamentary Procedures

NDI continues to meet formally and informally with political party leaders, senior bureaucrats, Members of Parliament and Committee chairs to discuss parliamentary reforms. These meetings, in addition to regular workshops and other consultations, remain essential to NDI's ongoing work with Parliament.

In early September, NDI invited the President of the Legislative Council of Victoria, Australia Bruce Chamberlain, to attend a series of discussions on the role of the opposition in Bangladesh. The lack of an influential role for opposition parties in parliament has been identified as one of the main reasons why opposition parties are quick to resort to parliamentary boycotts. The discussions with Chamberlain were intended to build upon the agreements

reached during NDI and The Carter Center's pre-election assessment mission in which a consensus was reached among various political parties on several issues relating specifically to the role of the opposition in parliament following the elections.

Co-sponsored by the Governance Coalition, a local NGO, NDI arranged seminars in Sylhet, Chittagong and Rajshahi that brought together politicians from all the major parties, academics, journalists and other prominent citizens. During the seminars, a range of recommendations were made that contributed to forming the basis for a later event held in Dhaka and sponsored by the Daily Star newspaper (See Appendix D: Outline of Recommendations). At the event, senior politicians and editors joined diplomats to discuss the findings of the various meetings and seminars. They came up with a list of priorities that will be presented to the new government following the elections. Approximately 70 people attended and the event received national media attention.

IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- NDI received helpful feedback from variety of governance, academic and civil society groups on the design and effective implementation of the Study Circles.
- The polling agent-training program succeeded in ensuring widespread acceptance of the need for trained agents at polling centers.
- The program succeeded in distributing over 600,000 polling agent manuals to party officials at the local level throughout the country and in directly training more than 700 constituency-level party activists.
- The polling agent training material was also used by various smaller parties and NGOs and was well received by the local and international political and diplomatic communities.
- In addition to constituency level activists, a core of trainers were also recruited through the parties who worked with NDI staff to deepen the Institute's connection to the political parties.
- NDI worked with several smaller left and right wing parties, giving a breadth to the Institute's political contacts, including contacts with several smaller Islamic parties.
- More than 70% of those invited to participate took part in the polling agent training program, with a total of over 700 people trained directly by the Institute.
- The Institute was able to bring together leaders from all major political parties. This accomplishment was enhanced by the consensus reached between those both in Dhaka and in the regions on the changes that need to be implemented by the newly elected government.

- The NDI/Carter Center delegation received a great deal local publicity (i.e., news articles were printed in local papers discussing the delegation's visit and the delegation was featured on local television).

V. EVALUATION

This quarter, NDI met the program objectives in the following ways:

Increasing Citizen Involvement in the Parliamentary Process

Objective: Increase coordination between CSOs and committees during the law drafting process; and

Objective: Enhance CSOs' capacity to advocate for parliamentary reform and the creation of a Citizens Relations Office.

By engaging citizens and CSO leaders in the process of developing the study circle program, NDI has increased the capacity of citizens to translate their interests in working with parliament and committees into realistic programs and projects. While still in its introductory stages, the study circle is proving to be a valuable tool for increasing public debate on policy issues.

Increase the Legitimacy of the Electoral Process

Objective: Identify challenges to a transparent and fair electoral process, including the challenges faced as a result of Bangladesh's electoral laws, and recommend ways to enhance this process;

Objective: Demonstrate international interest in and support for a peaceful, transparent and democratic election process; and

Objective: Educate party activists about their rights and responsibilities.

NDI has helped to increase the legitimacy of the electoral process through election and pre-election observation missions, conducting a political party polling agent training of trainers program, and creating and distributing a party polling agents' manual. The large amount of local publicity surrounding the delegation demonstrated international support for a fair and competitive electoral process. The presence of the delegation also helped to promote public discussion among party members and voters about the electoral process.

NDI's pre-election delegation raised public expectations concerning the conduct and outcome of the election. The agreement reached by the political leaders as a result of the delegation provided the Institute with openings through which to help drive a post-election reform package.

A senior European Union official described the program as “the most significant international contribution made by the international community to the 2001 elections.”

Assist Members of Parliament in Reviewing and Strengthening Parliamentary Procedures

Objective: Increase cooperation between the political parties on areas of common concern;

Objective: Improve the openness and efficiency of parliamentary procedures at the plenary and committee levels.

Objective: Build the capacity of the Citizens Relations Office.

NDI has helped to strengthen Parliament through ongoing engagement with party leadership and civil society regarding political party reform. The Institute was able to bring together leaders from all major political parties. This accomplishment was enhanced by the consensus reached between those both in Dhaka and in the regions on the changes that need to be implemented by the newly elected government.

The Institute conducted activities to increase cooperation between the political parties and improve parliamentary processes. NDI suggested to the Speaker of the Parliament that he form a Citizens Relations Office to encourage Bangladeshis to learn about their legislature and become more involved in the political process. The late Speaker, who passed away in July 2001, took initial steps to establish such an office that will hopefully be carried out following the election of the new Parliament.

VI. FUTURE ACTIVITIES

Next quarter, NDI will complete reports on the Polling Agent Training Program, draft an internal report on election day activities, as part of an environmental assessment for use by NDI in determining its future Bangladesh programs, and conclude its election related activities, including a local-staff based post election evaluation. Using the Study Circles method, NDI will continue to facilitate the development of a series of citizens’ forums to establish lines of communication and cooperation between civil society and Parliamentary committees. The Institute will also continue to meet with party leaders, Members of Parliament and committee chairs to discuss parliamentary reforms.